

Checklist of Alaska bird species: growing by leaps and bounds

by Toby Burke

In 1959 Ira Gabrielson and Frederick Lincoln published the monumental ornithological work *Birds of Alaska*. This comprehensive work includes an annotated list of 311 naturally occurring bird species that had been observed in Alaska through June 1958. In 1978 Brina Kessel and Daniel Gibson updated the list through November 1977 totaling 381 bird species. In 1991 Gibson and Kessel again updated the list documenting 436 species. Gibson, Steven Heinl, and Theodore Tobish compiled 468 species through 2002. And as of January 1, 2007 the *Checklist of Alaska Birds* stood at a remarkable 478 species. If that isn't impressive enough as of January 1, 2008 it increased by seven to 485 species not to mention 26 additional unsubstantiated species.

The *Checklist of Alaska Birds* is primarily founded on the collection of voucher specimens but in the absence of an actual physical specimen audio, photographic, and video recordings are used to substantiate the state's naturally occurring species. Unsubstantiated species are those not meeting this rigorous documentation standard their presence being founded solely on compelling written details by one or more expert observers. Thus, through 2007, at least 511 naturally occurring bird species have been reliably observed in Alaska.

This year was an incredible year for new bird species in Alaska. Strays from Eurasia included Gray Heron and Brown Hawk-Owl observed on St. Paul Island and Sedge Warbler and Yellow-browed Bunting observed on St. Lawrence Island. Bullock's Oriole and Vesper Sparrow are North American breeders also newly documented in Alaska. Additionally, the checklist gained a new species as the result of a taxonomic division of Bean Goose, a Eurasian vagrant, into Taiga Bean-Goose and Tundra Bean-Goose.

Eurasian Collared-Dove, an Old World species, was also observed in Alaska in 2007 but observers did not submit supporting documentation in time to be considered for the latest checklist update. Interestingly, the Eurasian Collared-Dove escaped from captivity in the Bahamas in the 1970s, has become

firmly established in the southeastern United States, and through natural dispersal as well as deliberate releases has rapidly colonized North America. There is a good chance that we on the Kenai Peninsula may see the vanguard of this invasion within a few years.

The checklist does not include species whose occurrence in Alaska is considered unnatural, the result of human assistance, known or presumed. This includes captive birds, escaped or deliberately released, as well as ship-assisted arrivals. Accordingly, you will not see Humboldt Penguin on the checklist even though a Humboldt Penguin was captured alive in a southeast Alaska fisherman's net in 2002. It is strongly suspected that the penguin was transported to Alaska waters aboard a South American ship. Chilean and Peruvian fisherman commonly keep these docile penguins as shipboard pets. Nor will you see Brown Booby on the checklist even though one accompanied a yacht sailing 2,200 miles from Hawaii to the port of Kodiak in August 1999.

Other notable birds you will not see on the checklists are ones that are becoming increasingly common on the human landscape such as Rock Pigeon (domestic pigeon), Wild Turkey, Northern Bobwhite, and Ring-necked Pheasant. Considered commensals these species are not known to persist independent of humans and their altered environments. But it should be noted that we likely will see Ring-necked Pheasants included on some future Checklist of Alaska Birds. After numerous introductions it appears that they are breeding and expanding in the greater Homer area to the point that they may some day persist independent of humans.

Though also not native to Alaska, European Starling is already on the state checklist, not merely because it is believed to have made it to Alaska on its own, where it typically lives in urban and agricultural environments, but because it also persists, though not commonly, in the larger wilder landscape. European Starling along with the newly arrived Eurasian Collared-Dove and the rarely encountered House Sparrow and House Finch have the com-

mon and dubious distinction of being our only invasive bird species yet encountered in Alaska.

It must be noted that like most comprehensive bird checklists the *Checklist of Alaska Birds* reflects not only the contributions of many highly skilled and passionate professional ornithologists and wildlife managers but also the contributions of many highly skilled and passionate citizen scientists whose eyes, ears, and

minds are open to the diversity of our Alaska avifauna.

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